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RUCNOSC/OSCE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PBTS](#) [CASC](#) [IR](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN: PRO-OPPOSITION PARTIES HOLD SMALL,  
PEACEFUL PROTEST OVER SOCIAL ISSUES, N-K

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED; NOT FOR INTERNET DISTRIBUTION.

¶1. (SBU) On May 12, several small pro-opposition parties staged a peaceful, sanctioned protest over social issues such as recent price increases, salaries, and pensions; they also called upon the GOAJ to disclose more information to the public about the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh negotiations. This was the first sanctioned protest held by a group other than the Musavat Party since police violently broke up an opposition protest on November 26, 2005. Protesters included members of the Azerbaijan Way, the National Democratic Party, the Liberal Democratic Party, and various NGOs. Participation peaked at about 400; however, by the end of the protest, only about 150 remained. Police behaved peacefully, although they asked the protest organizers to cut off one particularly emotional participant's speaking time.

¶2. (SBU) The crowd was comprised mostly of youth; the group did not pay much attention to the speakers and began to trickle out soon after the start of the protest. The main speakers, Azerbaijan Way Chair Ilgar Gasimov and National Democratic Party Chair (and former Minister of Internal Affairs under former President Albufaz Elchibey) Iskender Hamidov, criticized the Tariff Council's January decision to increase utility prices and demanded that salaries and pensions be increased to reflect the true cost of living in Azerbaijan. Hamidov also spoke briefly about the rights of ethnic Azeris living in Iran, and shared his desire for Azerbaijan to unite with "Southern Azerbaijan." Participants carried banners reading "No Azerbaijan without Karabakh;" "Free, Fair, and Democratic Elections," and "Stop Pressure on the Press."

¶3. (SBU) COMMENT: We welcome the GOAJ's decision to allow this group to hold a political protest. However, we remain concerned by GOAJ restrictions on freedom of assembly, particularly GOAJ policy on granting permission only for rallies in "approved" locations far from downtown Baku. Full restoration of the right to freedom of assembly is critical to Azerbaijan's democratic development, and will become even more vital in the run-up the October 2008 Presidential Elections. We will continue to press the importance of this with all levels of GOAJ contacts.  
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